

Why It's Time for Sexual Assault Self-Defense Training

Not just physical skills but brain-based, culture-changing mental habits.

Scientifically supported ways to resist assault and coercion – especially habits of owning sexual desires, values, and rights.

Jim Hopper, Ph.D. – September 5, 2018



In this #MeToo era there are many perspectives and debates, often across generational and political divides, about how to prevent sexual assaults and the difference between assault and “bad sex.” As an expert in psychological trauma who regularly teaches about brain-based responses to sexual assault, I can shed light on something that’s been missing from most public and policy conversations: self-defense training.

When I explain to higher education administrators how self-defense training could play a major role in preventing sexual assaults on their campuses, responses typically range from surprise to strong resistance. With military commanders, it’s different story. Before I even mention self-defense, light bulbs go on in their heads. They’ve long understood how people respond to being attacked, even if they don’t know the brain causes, and once they’ve connected the dots from combat to sexual assault, those serious about prevention commonly ask, *Can’t self-defense training prevent sexual assaults? Can’t we “harden the targets”?*

Yes, but It’s complicated, I say. Focusing on self-defense can shift attention and accountability away from perpetrators, away from bystanders who might prevent assaults, and away from powerful people (e.g., generals and college presidents) with influence over institutional factors that can increase or decrease assaults. Furthermore, even the very best self-defense training may not prevent or stop an assault, and some will try to discredit victims who’ve received the training or blame them for “failing” to fight off an attack.

Those are legitimate and important concerns. Nonetheless, self-defense training is an essential tool for preventing sexual assault and a great policy option that – when properly understood for its potential to change culture – could be embraced by people of all cultural and political stripes, including those with allegiance to feminist and libertarian ideals, so often at war these days.

To see why, we need a deeper understanding – one grounded in neuroscience – of what makes both combat training and sexual assault self-defense training effective.

Lessons from the Military

No one knows better than military commanders that when people are under attack, their ability to mount an effective defense depends on *the nature of their training*.

One key component of effective combat training is *repetitiveness*, literally drilling in new habits: how to fire weapons, execute combat formations, etc. Without sufficient practice, the training won't deeply ingrain essential habits in young recruits.

But without a second component, that is, lots of practice in the *specific situations* where those habits must be applied, such training is useless and even dangerous. That's why the military has spent so much on simulating the streets and buildings of Iraqi and Afghan cities and villages, and on replicating enemy strategies and tactics.



Effective combat training requires repetitive drilling in situations resembling those where the skills will be needed.

Lessons from Neuroscience

Why are repetitive drilling and practice in simulated combat environments critical to effective training? Because of how our brains work.

With or without such training, people respond to being attacked – whether enemy fire or sexual assault – in ways programmed into all human brains by eons of evolution and by repeated life experiences. As shown by decades of neuroscience research, *highly stressed brains run on reflexes and habits*.

When the [brain's defense circuitry](#) (including the amygdala) detects danger or attack, it suddenly and profoundly alters brain functioning, often beginning with brief [freeze responses](#). It unleashes a surge of chemicals that can [rapidly impair the prefrontal cortex](#) – the brain region most responsible for the “executive functions” that otherwise make us rational beings, not mere creatures of stimulus and response. Then, the defense circuitry dominates behavior with rapidly deployable [reflexes](#) and [habits](#).

That's why military service members' brains must be able to access and execute – instantly and automatically – deeply-ingrained habits from effective combat training. That's what enables them to survive and prevail in battle.

Missing Training, Courtroom Travesties

Yet those same service members can't depend on effectively trained habits to kick in when someone *sexually* attacks them. Wait, you might think: *What about hand-to-hand combat training? What about military martial arts?* Indeed, in military courtrooms around the world, defense attorneys routinely tell juries that service members could not possibly have been raped because they've had such training.

Unfortunately, that training is no more useful in most sexual assaults, especially those committed by known and trusted fellow service members, than it is in fixed-wing aerial combat. If it were, then military sexual assault rates would be much lower than civilian rates, but they aren't.



Most girls and women have habits for politely resisting unwanted sexual advances, but those are useless during assaults.

While a small percentage of service members receive training in self-defense tactics specific to sexual assault, that training is usually very brief and lacking in those two essential features: lots of practice, in situations closely resembling those where it must be applied.

Despite those realities, I've seen a defense attorney cross-examine a young Marine by reading out loud, line after line, from her service's military martial arts training manual. He rapidly fired more than 200 questions about particular techniques she had learned – each a leading question that compelled the answer “yes.” *Choke hold? Yes. Eye poke? Yes.* On and on until the judge finally cut him off.

If his client had even *attempted* to rape her, the attorney claimed, surely she could have fought him off with those techniques. Surely, he implied, she *would* have fought him. She may *claim* she said “no” several times as he forcibly removed her clothes, but given her martial arts

training, the attorney suggested, there's simply no way it could have been rape. She must be lying.

Habit-Based Responses to Sexual Assault

Just before the attorney's sustained verbal assault on her credibility, the young Marine had described how she *actually* responded during the sexual assault.

Like so many girls and women, she had never received effective sexual assault self-defense training, and therefore she had fallen back on the only deeply ingrained habits she had for dealing with unwanted sexual advances from men she knew. After the perpetrator suddenly shoved her onto the bed and right up to when he began raping her, she had politely, but with increasing urgency and desperation, repeated the words *no* and *stop*, and the phrases *You're married. You don't need to be doing this.*

By the time most girls leave high school, uttering such phrases is a habitual strategy for warding off unwanted sexual advances – for politely avoiding boys' hurt feelings or anger, for appealing to their self-interest. For the young Marine, those behaviors had worked in the past, as they have for millions of girls and women. But when the other person *ignores* those polite signals, they're useless.

The defense attorney's argument, routinely used against victims of sexual assault in the military, is baseless. It's contradicted by decades of research on how stress, especially extreme stress, leaves the brain dominated by reflexes and habits. It doesn't square with *what the military itself knows* – about

how people (and their brains) typically respond to attack and function in states of extreme stress, and about the kind of training required to replace old habits with new ones.

Lessons from Campus Research

Fortunately, there's growing evidence, not from the military but from college campus researchers, on self-defense training that can reduce not only sexual assaults but all kinds of coercive sex.



Girls, women, and all genders have the right to take ownership of their sexual desires, values, and choices. Good self-defense training cultivates the mental habits for doing so, especially when someone is trying to coerce them.

A [watershed study](#) was published in 2015 by *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Charlene Senn and her colleagues randomly assigned more than 800 women entering Canadian universities to sexual assault “resistance training” versus a more typical and limited intervention (i.e., brief information session and brochures). Over their first year of college, 5% of women in the program reported being raped, which was *half* the 10% rate of the control group. For attempted rape the rate was 63% lower in the resistance training group, and it was 34% lower for *any* experience of non-consensual sexual contact. Follow-up findings through the second year of college included [20% to 63% lower rates](#) among the women who got the training than those who didn't.

That's big and welcome news, and warrants replication studies on American campuses, where

Senn's program, also known as “[Flip the Script](#),” is now being [offered at some universities](#).

But no young woman should have a 1-in-20 chance of being raped in her first year of college. I certainly don't want my daughter and her friends facing those odds.

Can we do better? To answer that question, we must again consider *the nature of the training*, and get into a few details.

New Mental Habits Are Key

Senn's relatively successful program is only 12 hours long, with *only about six hours* for learning and realistically practicing verbal and physical resistance skills. That's not nearly enough to ingrain new habit behaviors that can be accessed automatically while under attack. Would the U.S. military send people into combat with only six hours of training?

One way to improve self-defense training, then, might be more intensive training in the same skills. Such programs exist. Jocelyn Hollander has published promising findings on a [10-week program](#) with two hours of realistic practice every week, and research is needed on shorter versus longer programs.

Still, how might the shorter program reduce sexual assaults? Senn has offered an answer to that question – and to another question as well, namely, how did her program also reduce *attempted* assaults and *any experiences of coercion* that fall short of assault?

The answer, [Senn suggests](#), is found in the program’s final 3-hour unit, *sexuality and relationships*, based primarily on a [program](#) of the Unitarian Universalist Church. That unit “puts women’s own values and desires at the center” of discussions about two things: *how to assess risks* of being sexually assaulted, and *how to overcome internal barriers* to acknowledging and resisting unwanted sexual behaviors from men they know.

This is key: Such discussions can *jump-start the formation of new habits* – of experiencing, reflecting upon, and making decisions about one’s own sexual desires and values, especially in sexual interactions and relationships.

Ingraining new *physical* habits requires practice in realistic scenarios, and lots of it, certainly more than six hours. But burning in new *mental* habits of relating to one’s sexual desires, values, and rights – that’s a different story, because young people can practice those habits just about anywhere, anytime. Most young people also have many opportunities to practice new mental habits for responding to *other people’s* sexual behaviors. That includes peers who are drunk, impulsive, sexually awkward, and apt to “miss signals” – as well as those who *simply don’t care*, at least once aroused, about others’ signals, wishes, or well-being.

Critically, such mental habits can be engaged in *before* interactions become so coercive or forceful that the resulting stress impairs the brain’s rational prefrontal cortex. That makes those habits protective in another way too: by preventing or at least delaying such escalation they can *safe-guard rational and flexible thinking*, thereby increasing the odds of responding effectively to unique and complex situations (e.g., manipulative coercion coming from someone you thought you could trust).

In short, that “relationships and sexuality” unit of Senn’s program can foster processes that *deeply ingrain new mental habits* – habits not only for preventing rape and sexual assault, but for resisting and effectively responding to sexual coercion of any kind. Indeed, it can initiate and reinforce new mental habits, many already promoted by consent and bystander training, for relating with greater awareness, authority, and maturity to all things sexual. *What are my sexual desires? Do I really want to do that? Do I want him to do that? Does that square with my (Christian/Jewish/Islamic/Army) values?*

Culture Change, Mature and Healthy Sex

That’s where the bigger picture comes into view: Those mental habits, when routinely expressed in speech and behavior, can help create new social norms and transform culture – on college campuses and in other communities, both civilian and military.

That’s the true promise of giving young people effective tools for exercising authority over their own sexuality; for asserting their own freedom, dignity, and rights in relationships; and for helping each other move from adolescent ignorance, awkwardness, and alcohol-induced impulsivity (and potential coercion or violence) to mature and healthy sexual values and behaviors.

Those are goals that can be embraced not only by feminists and progressives, but also by libertarians and many social conservatives, and by anyone focused, like Betsy DeVos, on victims of false accusations and unfair campus investigations and tribunals. That is, if programs like Senn's can foster habits of *proactive* sexual awareness, power, and morality (e.g., less likely to engage impulsively in drunken loveless sex), then they can also reduce later *reactive* misinterpretations and false accusations by misguided students or campus staff.

Caveat: The Best Training May Not Be Enough

Of course, even the best self-defense training will not usher in some future utopia.

The most effective programs, on their own, will have limited impacts because they only focus on potential victims' thinking and behaviors. They must be part of comprehensive approaches that train bystanders, cultivate effective community leadership, and target those at risk to commit (and [recommit](#)) sexual assaults. Indeed, there will always be those who (at least when they're aroused, intoxicated, or both) treat other people as objects and could care less about their wishes, dignity, and well-being.

Also, despite getting great self-defense training, some people may still respond like those with no training at all – with ineffective old habits (e.g., from gender socialization or childhood abuse) or ancient survival reflexes that render them temporarily passive and helpless (as sometimes happens to well-trained military personnel in horrific combat situations). So we must always guard against the blaming of victims for their sexual assaults, no matter what self-defense training they've received.

Where Can We Go from Here?

I'll end with some suggestions for getting to a future in which scientifically proven self-defense training is widely available and helping to reduce sexual violence and coercion on campuses and other communities across the country and throughout society. These shouldn't be controversial.

It would really help if everyone understood the [basic realities](#) of attacked and stressed brains, whether it's military combat or sexual assault, and how sexual violence can be reduced by ingraining new mental habits for asserting authority over one's own sexual values, rights, and choices.

We also need to understand that [boys and men are sexually assaulted](#) and need training tailored to their needs, as do people who don't conform to traditional gender roles, for whom rates of sexual assault are very high. For some young people with histories of prior abuse or assault, the realistic practice scenarios of self-defense training are very challenging, so programs must be optional and it must be trauma-informed (as Senn's and Hollander's programs are). And some young people (e.g., from religiously conservative families) have values relating to sexuality that they (and their parents) sincerely believe are incompatible with such training; they must not be coerced into participation, nor judged for opting out.

State legislatures and Congress, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Departments of Education, Justice, and Defense can certainly help: by acknowledging and disseminating self-defense research; by providing more funding and incentives to implement and evaluate the most promising programs; and by including research-supported self-defense training as a critical component of sexual assault prevention efforts required of schools and the military services. (To date prevention efforts and funding have

focused almost entirely on bystander training, which is important but bystanders are only present for [less than one-fifth](#) of sexual assaults and the training may have the [unintended effect](#) of making men who are at high risk of committing sexual assaults even more likely to do so.)

The media and Hollywood can help, too, by realistically (not gratuitously) portraying sexual coercion and assault; by educating people about common but still widely misunderstood [brain-based responses to sexual assault](#); by showing the skills and habits of effective resistance, and raising awareness of programs that teach them; and by telling more stories of how young people actually mature toward healthy and moral sexual behavior and relationships.

It's time for everyone who wants to prevent sexual assaults (and relatively rare misguided or false accusations) to connect the dots from solid neuroscience and military commonsense to the growing research on self-defense and its benefits.

And maybe, in this #MeToo era, we're finally ready to decide: Are we going to offer *every* young person *all* of the tools they need to prevent sexual assault and foster mature sexual behavior? If yes, then we need to act, and act decisively, just like those military leaders I teach who are eager to take action once those light bulbs go on – but have yet to be given the necessary knowledge and resources.

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